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THE KNOWLEDGE OF PRIMITIVE MAN¹

By A. A. GOLDENWEISER

HOW does primitive man think? is the question we are prone to ask when dealing with his mentality. Among elaborate attempts to answer that question one may cite such works as Tylor's *Primitive Culture* or Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1, or even such recent works as Lévy-Bruhl's *Les fonctions mentales des sociétés inférieures* and Durkheim's *La vie religieuse*. The authors of these works agree that the intellectual potentialities of the savage are not markedly, if at all, different from our own, but they insist that his thinking is very different indeed. Spencer and Tylor held that the thinking of the savage was vitiated by his premises. Grant the savage his premises, they taught, and his thinking will prove satisfactory. As against these older authors, more recent writers defend the view that something is radically wrong with the thinking itself of the savage.

The cardinal principle pervading savage thought, says Lévy-Bruhl, is the law of participation. Emotional and intellectual associations are established, or indeed exist from the beginning, between beings, things, activities, and the phenomena thus psychically correlated form mental clusters of great stability which determine the character of primitive mentality and make it thoroughly different from ours. Thus it comes that the mind of the savage is proof against the demands of logic, his thinking is *prelogical*. In a review of Lévy-Bruhl's suggestive work² and in another of Lévy-Bruhl and Rivers³ I have attempted to show that Lévy-Bruhl's conclusion is due to a faulty selection of the terms of his comparison, that the principle of participation holds sway in a large domain of our own thinking, that much of savage thinking is as

¹ Read before the American Folk-Lore Society at Philadelphia.

² *American Anthropologist*, XIII, 1911, pp. 121-130.

³ *Current Anthropological Literature*, I, 1912, pp. 103-108.

logical as some of ours, and that when analyzing the categories of thought prevailing in a group, we must always examine these categories within their particular cycle of participation. Then only may we hope to see them in a proper perspective.

In his analysis of Australian totemism Durkheim repeatedly turns to the general problem of savage mentality and attempts to show that the concepts of category, of force, of cause, were born within the religio-magical realm of primitive thought. Totemic classification of nature in accordance with the social divisions of the group thus lies at the root of all classification, while the concepts of cause and force find their matrix in the primitive conception of the totemic principle, which is but an early form of *mana*, the all-pervading magical substance. As against Durkheim's view we must urge that the savage knows of other forms of classification which are not totemic, refer to animals, plants, objects, actions, dreams, and are based on observed differences and similarities between the phenomena classified together or apart. That these tentative classifications should all be reducible to the prototype of totemic categories in nature seems a gratuitous and ill-founded assumption. Similar objections may be raised against the religio-magical derivation of the concepts of cause and force.

The above remarks resolve themselves into a general criticism of most studies of primitive mentality, on the ground that in such studies almost exclusive attention is given to the elucidation and analysis of primitive *thinking*, especially those domains of it which differ most from our own and hence appear to us as irrational, whereas another vast realm of primitive mentality is almost completely neglected, namely the positive knowledge of the savage, the domain of his concrete experience, his familiarity with beings, things, relations, processes, actions. That such a domain exists and that its scope is vast is a fact which readily appears from the data of ethnography.

The knowledge of the properties of material things is always there and in some groups is extensive. The snowhouse of the Eskimo, the wooden structures of the Kwakiutl or Haida, the bark dwellings of the Iroquois, if we restrict our examples to North

America, give evidence of a manifold and, in part, accurate knowledge on the part of their makers, of the properties of the various materials employed, their strength, durability, pliability, etc. In the selection of suitable materials, we observe that certain trees, for instance, are utilized, so and so old and of a given thickness. And, of course, in the preparation of materials for use, long series of processes are gone through which are all based on knowledge of properties of the materials, and mastery of processes of work. We need do no more than point out that such knowledge, based on extensive and prolonged observation and practice, is involved in all industries: the building of houses, canoes, rafts; the making of pottery, basketry, wood-ware; spinning, weaving, tanning of skins; sewing, embroidery, carving, etc. The details of various devices for the hunting, trapping, and snaring of animals, in addition to giving evidence of knowledge of the type referred to above, disclose an equally thoroughgoing and, if anything, more accurate familiarity with the characters and habits of different animals. Unfortunately for the history of thought, the objects of material culture, while giving abundant indication of the direction and concrete result of mental processes, effectively disguise the history of such processes. Every material object of culture represents a chronologically extended series of inventions and adjustments compressed into a spacially and temporally unified system. It is but seldom that a glimpse may be gained into the history of observation, induction, generalization, trial and error, invention, improvement, which all have their share in the development of the final product. The existence and importance of these processes, however, cannot be doubted.¹

¹ It may, perhaps, be advisable to restrict the above remarks to material culture. Similar considerations, however, can easily be shown to apply to social organization, ethics, law, etc., where, however, the distinction between knowledge and thought is less clearly marked. Thus, in the domain of social organization, we find the understanding of the importance of a central authority, especially on occasions requiring coordinated action, the realization of the principle of equilibration of power, as shown, for instance, in the appointment of two military leaders, among the Seneca-Iroquois, the powers of each serving as a check on those of the other. The fundamental principles of equity, justice, are well understood. Another fact, which in the eyes of many field ethnologists serves more than any other factor to emphasize the psychic unity of savage and civilized, is the former's understanding of human nature. This understanding does not fail to create a bond between the sympathetic ethnologist and his informant, a bond transcending their racial, cultural, and individual differences.

The status of medicine, which combines properties of material and spiritual culture, reveals similar facts. Doubtless the entire field of primitive medicine is pervaded by magical ideas. Here, if anywhere, witchcraft reigns supreme. But on a par with magical devices, prescriptions, incantations, and other accessories of the magical art, closer study reveals a field of experiential knowledge of minerals, parts of animal bodies, and the curative properties of plants, a knowledge that is wide if not always accurate. Such methods of treating disease as the use of emetics, purgatives, blood-letting, massage, are also widely known in primitive communities.

I shall not multiply examples. The subject is an unexplored field, and these remarks are not designed to bring conclusions, but to direct attention to a hitherto neglected aspect of primitive mentality. But enough has been said to suggest some general corollaries.

The savage mind is certainly pervaded by irrational cycles of participation. They do not extend to all sides of life and thought in equal degree or equally at all times, but few if any are the aspects of his mentality which are safe against their intrusion. Based, on their relational side, on emotional and intellectual associations, these cycles of participation, on the side of their concrete content, are so many attempts to interpret nature, its phenomena and processes. On the other hand, the savage faces nature in his direct and daily experience and through his senses acquires an ever-widening knowledge of things, beings, processes, and their relations. He also utilizes this knowledge for his purposes. True, his thinking, the conscious elaboration of his mental content, busies itself but little with this aspect of his mentality. Here the irrational cycles of participation hold almost undisputed sway. This sway, however, cannot be assumed to be absolute; and it may, perhaps, be suspected that insufficient familiarity with the experiential knowledge of the savage is, in the main, responsible for our ignorance of the degree to which consciousness enters into that elaboration of savage experience which brings such conspicuous results most strikingly in the achievements of material culture, but also of spiritual culture.

Another corollary refers to the history of thought. For, as a result of studies suggested in these remarks, we may come to conceive of intellectual progress, from savagery to civilization, not as an evolution of mentality, but as a continuous accumulation of positive knowledge and a correlated advancement in the degree to which such knowledge determines thought.

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